

THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT

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WIDENING THE DOORWAYS OF OPPORTUNITY: PHILANTHROPIC EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT SYSTEMS

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THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT

Strengthening State Policies for
America's Working Poor

Millions of American breadwinners work hard to support their families. But, despite their determination and effort, many are mired in low-wage jobs that provide inadequate benefits and offer few opportunities for advancement. In fact, more than one out of four American working families now earn wages so low that they have difficulty surviving financially.²

Launched in 2002 and currently supported by the Annie E. Casey, Ford, Joyce, and Mott foundations, the Working Poor Families Project is a national initiative that works to improve these economic conditions. The project partners with state nonprofit organizations and supports their policy efforts to better prepare America's working families for a more secure economic future.

For more information:
www.workingpoorfamilies.org

INTRODUCTION

A decade of economic tumult has cast a spotlight on the fundamental link between education and skills and economic prosperity. Individual firms and regional economies rich in skilled workers have managed to adapt better to changing conditions, just as skilled and educated workers have proven more successful at navigating shifting employment landscapes. While skills alone are insufficient to guarantee economic success, they form the foundation of prosperity.

In today's world, workforce skills and postsecondary education serve as the building blocks of economic growth; no modern economy can thrive without an educated and skilled workforce. Similarly, the odds of securing a quality job increase along with education and skill levels. One recent national study concludes: "Essentially, postsecondary education or training has become the threshold requirement for access to middle-class status and earnings in good times and bad. It is no longer the preferred pathway to middle-class jobs – it is, increasingly the *only* pathway."³

That recognition has led the nation's civic leaders to fix their attention on the pivotal role postsecondary education and skill development systems play in producing the qualified and credentialed individuals demanded by expanding industries – industries that frequently struggle to meet their workforce needs due to America's comparative weakness internationally in preparing skilled individuals.⁴ In response, some policymakers have sought to strengthen the abilities of state postsecondary education and skill development systems to serve the adult workforce.

Strengthening state postsecondary education and skill development systems – systems that encompass such programs as technical education, literacy instruction, and occupational training – requires comprehensive changes to public policies and institutional practices. To that end, various philanthropic foundations have launched ambitious, multi-state, multi-year efforts to raise the educational attainment of Americans. Centered on close collaborations among established public systems and officials, such initiatives are pursuing goals valued by employers, workers, labor unions, civic leaders, and advocates for the working poor.

The goal of increasing postsecondary educational attainment is shared by **The Working Poor Families Project (WFPF)**, a national initiative to strengthen state policies influencing the advancement of low-income working families. Since 2002, the WFPF has partnered with 24 state-level nonprofit organizations, which have helped postsecondary education and skill development systems become more responsive to the needs of the country's 9.9 million low-income working families.⁵ In the process, the WFPF's 24 state partners have expanded and enhanced their reputations as credible, effective organizations that contribute informed voices to state policy debates – voices capable of supporting the array of reform efforts underway in state capitals.

The recent wave of philanthropic interest in state postsecondary education and skill development systems has focused attention on those systems' importance, potential, and limitations. To help the WFPF's state partners understand active foundation efforts and identify areas of commonality and opportunity, this *Policy Brief* profiles seven reform initiatives. Specifically, the brief summarizes the case for change, discusses the role of philanthropy, profiles the state policy components of seven initiatives, and presents five ways in which state partners can aid larger reform efforts.

THE SKILLS IMPERATIVE AND THE CASE FOR CHANGE

The last decade was an economically volatile one that began with a recession that gave way to a weak expansion that ended in the most severe downturn of the postwar era. Between 2000 and 2008, the number of American families that worked yet earned low incomes climbed from 9.2 million to 9.9 million.⁶ During that time, unemployment and poverty rates rose in most states, while median incomes generally fell or stagnated.⁷

This period demonstrated the importance of skills to economic success. Individuals with lower skill levels proved less able to adapt. In 2008, for instance, 53 percent of low-income working families lacked an adult member with any postsecondary education.⁸ Many firms, particularly those in growing fields, also realized the importance of workforce skills due to difficulties in finding qualified employees. In fact, a recent national study forecast that 63 percent of all job openings occurring by 2018 will require workers with some level of postsecondary education; public systems, however, are on pace to produce too few such individuals.⁹

The need to improve educational success rates and increase skill attainment levels has compelled civic leaders and policymakers to rethink longstanding assumptions about postsecondary education and skill development. Attention naturally has gravitated to ways of reducing the number of high school dropouts, but leaders also have recognized that the only way to fully address labor market needs is by helping working adults – the people who will account for the bulk of the workforce for the next two decades – acquire more education and training. As WFPF data show, in more than half of all low-income working families no adult possesses a postsecondary credential; moreover, one-third of all low-income working families include adults who lack a high school diploma.¹⁰ Policymakers therefore are striving to improve postsecondary and skill development systems.

In many states, public two-year colleges form the backbone of postsecondary education and skill development systems. They are also valued for their open access policies, affordability, and

commitment to life-long learning and occupational instruction – attributes that help advance economic mobility and growth. Nevertheless, two-year colleges generally have “operated on the margins of the educational system” and have confronted structural weaknesses – outdated funding formulas, financial aid policies that overlook the needs of working adults, and bureaucratic structures that hinder collaboration among programs – that undercut access, affordability, quality, and outcomes.¹¹ If those weaknesses were addressed, two-year colleges and larger public systems could play an even more significant role in fostering economic competitiveness and expanding individual opportunity. That potential has attracted the attention of national leaders. In 2009, President Barack Obama announced the **American Graduation Initiative**, which calls for increasing the number of two-year college graduates by five million over the next decade.¹²

Opportunities for reform have not escaped the attention of the WFPF’s state partners. In recent years, partners have addressed a variety of related issues, such as adult college readiness, need-based financial aid, developmental education, student support services, data systems, program alignment, and performance-based funding. The associated work has allowed state partners to acquire the knowledge, relationships, and organizational capacities needed to advance, achieve, and sustain change.

PHILANTHROPY AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

To catalyze change, a variety of national foundations have invested in initiatives designed to improve the effectiveness of state postsecondary and skill development systems and institutions. Private philanthropic organizations – like the Ford, Charles Stewart Mott, Joyce, and Annie E. Casey foundations – historically have invested in such projects, just as certain regional foundations have supported local projects. The scope and scale of investment, however, has grown due in part to the work of two relatively new, education-focused foundations: The Lumina Foundation for Education and The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Based in Indianapolis, **The Lumina Foundation for Education** is the nation’s largest private foundation devoted exclusively to postsecondary education. The foundation was endowed in 2000, with \$770 million in proceeds from the sale of a student loan company.¹³ Lumina organizes its philanthropy around a “Big Goal” of raising the share of the population with a quality postsecondary credential to 60 percent by the year 2025.¹⁴ To that end, Lumina invests in initiatives aimed at preparing students for postsecondary education, fostering student success, and increasing the productivity of educational institutions.¹⁵ Central to its work is a commitment to low-income and disadvantaged students, including adult learners.¹⁶

Based in Seattle and possessing a \$35-billion endowment, **The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation** was named in 2000, when the family of the founder of Microsoft consolidated various philanthropic initiatives.¹⁷ The foundation’s United States portfolio centers on secondary and postsecondary education. Specifically, Gates underwrites efforts that prepare high school graduates for higher education and facilitate postsecondary success. A key foundation goal is to “double the number of young people who earn a postsecondary degree or certificate with value in the marketplace by the time they reach age 26.”¹⁸ Like Lumina, Gates is concerned about disadvantaged students, particularly young adults with modest skill levels.

The emergence of two well-endowed foundations committed to strengthening postsecondary education has contributed to a new wave of philanthropic interest and investment. Philanthropic initiatives reflect the beliefs that postsecondary education matters to the nation’s economic competitiveness and social well-being and that Americans must become more skilled. Furthermore, recent initiatives envision two-year colleges as the locus of improvements in workforce skills. Finally, ongoing efforts stress both student access and success. The idea that success is the yardstick against which progress should be judged explains why foundations like Lumina and Gates have set clear national goals for credential completion.

DRIVING CHANGE: SEVEN PHILANTHROPIC EFFORTS IN PROFILE

Owing to their relative youth, philanthropic efforts aimed at strengthening state postsecondary and skill development systems are not well known. Possibilities for confusion also exist due to differences among state systems and the fact that foundations often sponsor multiple projects and

cross-invest. For WPFP partners, there are seven national initiatives of interest. At least one of the initiatives is active in 21 of the 24 states that have WPFP partners. All of the projects seek to influence some or all of the education and training issues central to the WPFP: adult college readiness, developmental education, career pathways, financial aid, support services, data use and accountability, systems change, funding, and credential completion.

Figure 1: Selected Philanthropic Efforts to Strengthen State Educational and Training Systems Active in WPFP States

WPFP State	Achieving the Dream	Postsecondary Success Initiative	Complete College America	Breaking Through	Developmental Education Initiative	National Fund for Workforce Solutions	Shifting Gears
Alabama							
Arkansas	X		X	X			
Colorado				X		X	
Connecticut	X		X		X	X	
District of Columbia						X	
Georgia		O	X				
Illinois	X		X			X	X
Kentucky				X			
Maine				X			
Maryland	X		X			X	
Massachusetts	X		X	X		X	
Michigan	X			X			X
Mississippi							
Nebraska	X					X	
New Jersey							
New Mexico	X			X			
New York	X	O		X		X	
North Carolina	X	X		X	X		
Ohio	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Pennsylvania	X		X	X		X	
Texas	X	X	X	X	X		
Utah			X				
Washington	X	X		X		X	
Wisconsin						X	X

Notes: For the Postsecondary Success Initiative, an "X" denotes a core state while an "O" denotes a targeted investment state. **Sources:** Official web sites of the named initiatives as of June 8, 2010

ACHIEVING THE DREAM: COMMUNITY COLLEGES COUNT

Launched in 2003 by the Lumina Foundation, **Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count** (ATD) is the largest philanthropic effort specifically targeting two-year colleges.¹⁹ ATD's purpose is to "help more community college students succeed with a special focus in students of color and low-income students."²⁰ Over the years, ATD has grown to involve more than 100 institutions in 22 states, 14 of which have WFPF partners; funding now comes from 20 sources in addition to the Lumina Foundation.²¹

Consistent with Lumina's goal of increasing the share of the population with postsecondary credentials, ATD works to implement and sustain reforms that improve success rates. Participating colleges and college systems commit to a rigorous, evidence-based institutional change process and receive funding, technical assistance, peer learning, and leadership development opportunities. ATD takes a long-term view and uses strategies to foster institutional change, policy development, public engagement, knowledge generation, and capacity building.²²

Because policies and practices often hinder student success, ATD incorporates a state policy change component designed to reduce key barriers. ATD has identified outdated financial aid rules, inadequate funding levels, limited data and accountability systems, ineffective developmental education programs, and missing support services as particularly serious obstacles to student persistence and success.²³ For instance, ATD recognizes that financial aid policies need to be reformed to accommodate part-time students and those with families. ATD similarly seeks to change state funding formulas to incent student success. ATD also hopes to strengthen state data systems, notably their capabilities to track students over time and across programs.

POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS INITIATIVE

In 2009, following several years of development, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation unveiled its **Postsecondary Success Initiative** (PSI). PSI

encompasses a diverse set of investments designed to advance the goal of doubling the number of young adults who earn career-relevant credentials by the age of 26. PSI is built around intensive, multi-year partnership with selected state two-year college systems in nine states, including six with WFPF partners. During its first three years, PSI will direct core investments to Ohio, North Carolina, Texas, and Washington, while planning work will occur in Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, and New York.²⁴

PSI aims to help students, particularly low-income and minority ones, "get further, faster – and at far less cost in terms of time and money."²⁵ PSI recognizes that state policies often hinder student success, so the project incorporates a policy change component. By adopting evidence-based reforms, PSI hopes to improve the flow of students through the educational pipeline by reinforcing the weak points where students are apt to fall out. The project's focus is on younger adults, but many state policy reforms could benefit all low-skilled adults.

Specific issues of concern to PSI include overhauling developmental education, improving instructional methods, constructing academic pathways for at-risk students, improving financial aid for non-traditional students, expanding the use of educational technologies, strengthening data systems, and addressing flaws in state funding models.²⁶ For example, PSI hopes to change instructional techniques so as to accelerate and condense course delivery, such as by "modularizing" courses. And because state funding formulas often reward enrollment rather than success, PSI aims to create positive incentives through such mechanisms as differentiated funding and performance bonuses. In the same manner, PSI plans to experiment with new structures of financial aid directed at working students enrolled on a part-time basis, along with aid models that are independent of traditional semester calendars. Breaking that link would allow aid to support instructional programs that operate at a more rapid pace.²⁷

COMPLETE COLLEGE AMERICA

In 2010, **Complete College America**, a nonprofit organization funded in part by the Lumina and Gates foundations, announced the formation of an alliance of states committed to improving college completion rates.²⁸ The compact involves 22 states, 10 of which have WFPF partners.²⁹

Member states must commit themselves at the highest level – meaning governors and senior postsecondary educational officials – to raising college completion rates and adopting needed policy reforms. At a minimum, states must establish specific completion goals through the year 2020, develop detailed action plans, and collect and publish common data measures. Specific policy issues of interest to the alliance include college readiness, developmental education, credential completion, career pathways, data measurement, and system funding.³⁰ In the coming months, member states will craft their detailed plans for achieving the ambitious goals to which they committed themselves by joining the alliance.

BREAKING THROUGH

Breaking Through is a reform project focused on adult literacy education. In operation since 2005, the project's purpose is to strengthen the abilities of two-year colleges to serve adults with literacy levels at or below the 10th-grade level and transition those students into postsecondary programs.³¹ Project funding has come from a consortium of organizations that includes the Charles Stewart Mott, Gates, Ford, GlaxoSmithKline, and Walmart foundations.

The Breaking Through project has been active in 16 states, including 13 that have WFPF partners. In two of those states – Michigan and North Carolina – supplemental funding supports state-specific efforts. Seven Michigan colleges are focusing on improving literacy instruction geared towards dislocated workers, while five North Carolina colleges are improving the services provided to younger adults who previously left school.³²

Breaking Through recognizes that state policies and practices often hamper the effectiveness of adult literacy instruction. For example, many state-

based financial aid programs exclude students enrolled in non-degree literacy programs and those enrolled on less than half time basis.³³ Compared to the other initiatives described in this *Policy Brief*, Breaking Through takes a more indirect approach to state policy changes. The project uses its research capabilities and programmatic experiences to document problems and propose potential strategies that other stakeholders may advance. Specific concerns include financial aid, academic remediation, and literacy funding.³⁴ For example, to better align literacy and collegiate programs, for one, the project has documented the effectiveness of strategies like dual enrollment and bridge programs.³⁵

DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION INITIATIVE

The **Developmental Education Initiative** (DEI) is a joint effort between the Lumina and Gates foundations inspired by the organizations' shared view that inadequate developmental education is a serious obstacle to student success. Extensive research indicates that a sizable share of two-year college students require remediation prior to enrolling in college courses, yet relatively few students actually complete developmental courses or transition into collegiate programs.³⁶

DEI was launched in late 2009. Over a three-year period, DEI will partner with 15 ATD colleges in six states: Connecticut, Florida, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and Virginia.³⁷ Four of the states – Connecticut, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas – have WFPF partners. Project success will be measured in terms of improvements to student completion, persistence, transition rates, and student success as measured by grades and credit attainment.

The project's goal is to improve the effectiveness of the developmental instruction offered at two-year colleges, so students “move quickly into college-level courses, complete them, and gain a certificate or degree.”³⁸ Because state practices often overlook developmental education, DEI encompasses a policy change framework. Specific areas of policy attention include academic alignment, performance measurement, curriculum reform, student assessment, and program finance.³⁹ To facilitate

transitions into postsecondary programs, for instance, DEI seeks to adopt curricular reforms that blend developmental and collegiate instruction. DEI also aims to improve instructional quality, in part by reforming funding models, supporting the professional development of teachers, creating performance incentives, and providing support services.

National Fund for Workforce Solutions

Although not targeted directly at two-year colleges, the **National Fund for Workforce Solutions** is a major foundation-supported effort to reorient public workforce development systems. Launched in late 2007 after several years of pilot testing, the fund is a five-year effort to “strengthen and expand high-impact workforce development initiatives around the country.”⁴⁰ Initial funding came from a consortium of private foundations, corporations, and public agencies.⁴¹ The fund currently supports 21 collaborations in 17 states, including 12 with WFPF partners.⁴²

Figure 2: National Fund for Workforce Solutions Sites in WFPF States		
State	# Sites	Location
Colorado	1	Denver
Connecticut	1	Hartford
District of Columbia	1	Washington
Illinois	1	Chicago
Maryland	1	Baltimore
Massachusetts	1	Boston
Nebraska	1	Omaha
New York	1	New York City
Ohio	1	Cincinnati
Pennsylvania	2	Statewide, Philadelphia
Washington	1	Seattle/King County
Wisconsin	2	Milwaukee, South Wood County

Source: Web site of "National Fund for Workforce Solutions" (<http://nfwsolutions.org/locations>) as of June 1, 2010.

The fund supports the establishment of regional workforce partnerships and local funding collaboratives willing to invest in those workforce partnerships. The workforce partnerships have a “dual customer” focus, meaning that they aim to meet the needs of both regional industries facing workforce shortages and individual workers in need

of skill development and living-wage jobs. Many of the partnerships organize their efforts around career pathway models.⁴³

State-level policy change is part of the fund’s portfolio. The fund’s flexible structure means that individual sites can choose to pursue reforms as appropriate. In Pennsylvania, for example, the fund is supporting a statewide effort to reorient the entire state workforce system around industry partnership models – a reorientation supported in part by public funds. Farther north, Massachusetts’s participation has resulted in changes that have reduced some of the training obstacles facing low-wage workers; WFPF state partners helped develop and advance these changes.⁴⁴ In many states where the fund is operating, WFPF partners could play a useful role in helping individual sites craft and advance their policy goals.

Shifting Gears

Shifting Gears is an ambitious systems change effort initiated in 2007 by the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation in the Midwestern states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Shifting Gears aims to strengthen and align state postsecondary, literacy education, and skill development systems to improve the educational and employment outcomes of low-skilled adults, with a particular focus on increasing the number of adults with postsecondary credentials valued in the labor market.⁴⁵

Shifting Gears involves four core activities: (1) using data to foster improvements in policies and practices; (2) pursuing policy changes to leverage systems and institutional change; (3) engaging the field to generate ideas and commitment for reform; and (4) cultivating support for change through communication. The initiative favors such reforms as using bridge programs to transition adult basic and developmental education students into postsecondary programs and organizing postsecondary programs around career pathway models. Shifting Gears also promotes expansion of student support services and improvements to state data and accountability systems so they better track the progress of low-skilled adults. Unlike

other initiatives described in this *Policy Brief*, Shifting Gears looks beyond two-year colleges to larger state skill development systems, including the adult education and public workforce training programs.

State policy change is Shifting Gears' primary change lever based on the assumption that shifts in policies can address such problems as low levels of basic skills, poor program transitions, inadequate instructional methods, and underused data systems. In response, the participating states are championing a variety of innovations.⁴⁶ Wisconsin, for example, has focused on understanding and overcoming the barriers limiting student transitions between adult literacy and technical colleges by implementing statewide career pathway models.⁴⁷ Similarly, Illinois has worked to create bridge programs that link adult education to for-credit career and technical programs.⁴⁸

LEVERAGING CHANGE: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WFPF PARTNERS

While the seven philanthropic initiatives described above differ in their approaches, they share five overarching goals:

- ♦ Adopting institutional policy and practice changes that promote student persistence and completion.

- ♦ Equipping postsecondary institutions to serve low-income and disadvantaged students.
- ♦ Fostering a culture of data-driven, evidence-based decision-making.
- ♦ Cultivating public support for postsecondary education and skill development systems.
- ♦ Improving state policies pertaining to postsecondary education and skill development.

These goals mirror those championed by the WFPF. As with the foundation initiatives, the WFPF believes that America's economic and social well-being requires the workforce to become more skilled and views postsecondary education and skill development systems as vehicles for achieving that end. The challenge is to strengthen state programs and policies, which explains why the WFPF targets its analytical and communications capacities at state capitals. Fortunately, the spread of philanthropic reform efforts provides WFPF state partners with new opportunities for advancing shared issues. Thanks to the scale of foundation investments and the prominence of the investors, issues related to postsecondary education and skill development – such as developmental education, financial aid, data use, accountability, and credential completion – currently are receiving unprecedented levels of attention.

Figure 3: WFPF Postsecondary Education and Skills Development Issues of Concern to Selected Philanthropic Reform Efforts

Issue	Achieving the Dream	Postsecondary Success Initiative	Complete College America	Breaking Through	Developmental Education Initiative	National Fund for Workforce Solutions	Shifting Gears
Adult College Readiness				X			X
Developmental Education	X	X	X	X	X		X
Career Pathways			X			X	X
Program Transitions	X	X		X	X		X
Need-Based Financial Aid	X	X				X	X
System Funding	X	X	X		X		X
Support Services				X	X		X
Data Use & Accountability	X	X	X		X	X	X
Systems Change		X					X
Credential Completion	X	X	X		X	X	X

Sources: Official web sites of the named initiatives as of June 8, 2010.

WPFP state partners are well positioned to contribute to the advancement, achievement, and sustainability of reforms championed by the larger project and ongoing philanthropic initiatives. Over the years, different WPFP partners have demonstrated the ability to develop and use their expertise, capacity, and credibility to promote and contribute to important state policy change. This matters because policy and system change is a slow, painstaking process that seldom succeeds without sustained, targeted efforts and steady support from a diverse array of stakeholders.

WPFP partners can play an important role in helping achieve the state policy changes pursued by these philanthropic initiatives and other efforts. To do so, state partners must develop a familiarity with the various efforts' goals and strategies and identify areas where their expertise, capacities, and experiences can enrich larger undertakings. To this end, state partners should consider the following five actions.

**Figure 4: WPFP State Partners Supporting State Policy Change:
Examples from Arkansas, Wisconsin, and Massachusetts**

In its first publication prepared as part of the WPFP, the Southern Good Faith Fund (SGFF), a nonprofit organization based in Little Rock, proposed establishing “career pathways program” as a way of equipping two-year colleges to connect low-income adults with educational and career opportunities in high-growth fields like health care.

SGFF piloted the model in partnership with two colleges, and the success of that experiment led to the formation of a partnership involving the Arkansas Association of Two Year Colleges, the Department of Higher Education, and the Office of the Governor. After receiving an approximately \$12 million annual appropriation from the state legislature, the project expanded to every two-year college in the state. Since its inception, the Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative has served over 17,000 students while awarding over 10,000 credentials and degrees.

The Center on Wisconsin Strategies (COWS), a WPFP partner located in Madison, serves on the leadership team of the state's Shifting Gears project. The Regional Industry Skills Education (RISE) initiative seeks to increase the number of lower-skilled adults who hold the postsecondary credentials needed to hold high-demand jobs. Emphasis is placed on establishing career pathway programs and bridge programs that connect individuals to higher-paying opportunities in fields like machining and nursing.

COWS was a natural partner for this comprehensive reform effort because of its expertise in research, data analysis, and program evaluation. During RISE's initial phase, COWS provided various analytical services. First COWS analysts estimated the number of Wisconsin residents who potentially could benefit from the initiative (695,000). Second, COWS built a technical college “pipeline” data set documenting, among other things, academic completion and transition rates for students enrolled in adult literacy and developmental education programs.

Piloting of the regional workforce partnership model central to the National Fund for Workforce Solutions started in Massachusetts in 2001. A consortium of public and philanthropic organizations established SkillWorks, a training partnership dedicated to preparing low-skilled job seekers for living-wage employment positions in growing industries.

Since the project's beginning, the Crittenton Women's Union (CWU), a WPFP partner located in Boston, has provided the collaborative with sophisticated public policy expertise. The nonprofit organization works closely with other stakeholders to identify and eliminate policy barriers – such as the lack of need-based financial aid for students enrolled on a part-time basis – that prevent low-skill adults from participating in postsecondary education and skill development activities. Moreover, CWU has marshaled its policy knowledge, communications abilities, and strategic relationships to secure some \$50 million in public funding for the larger initiative, which now serves communities throughout the state.

First, *state partners can use the WFPF's data-driven policy change process to spotlight the needs of low-skilled workers.* WFPF and various foundation initiatives have much in common; however, WFPF partners bring particular experience with a population that receives comparatively little attention: non-traditional students, particularly low-income working adults. To highlight the needs of such students, WFPF state partners should make their data and analyses available and lend their expert and distinctive voice to state-level reform conversations. Also, WFPF partners should encourage their states to participate in all of the reform initiatives for which they are eligible, particularly those that permit states to join voluntarily, like Complete College America.

A recent example of a state partner contributing its voice occurred in Texas. There, the **Center for Public Policy Priorities** published research detailing how adults as well as ethnic and racial minorities constitute a significant portion of the developmental education population. This finding suggests the need to consider what policies, strategies and practices are needed to serve effectively such students.⁴⁹

Second, *state partners can use their analytical capabilities to help identify meaningful opportunities for policy and programmatic changes.* In many states, WFPF partners have acquired extensive knowledge about issues related to student access, program transitions, and credential completion. State partners should leverage this expertise to inform the creation of policies and programs intended to raise statewide educational and skill levels. In Arkansas, as described in Figure 4, the **Southern Good Faith Fund** partnered with two-year colleges, elected officials, and public systems to establish a successful statewide Career Pathways Initiative.

Third, *state partners can use their expertise in forming strategic partnerships to build the coalitions and networks needed to advance reforms.* As well-respected experts versed in the issues facing low-income working families, state partners are well positioned both to build compelling cases for the importance of public systems to individuals,

families, firms, and communities and to offer informed options for policy and programmatic changes. This credibility is particularly beneficial when dealing with situations in which change requires a reallocation of public resources or alterations to institutional behaviors.

Fourth, *state partners can combine their research and communications capacities with their credibility among elected and appointed policymakers to catalyze change.* An overarching goal of philanthropic reform efforts is to heighten public understanding of the importance of postsecondary education and skill development systems. Many state partners are well-positioned to aid in this process thanks to the trust they enjoy among journalists, service providers, and policy leaders. Partners should deploy their communications capabilities to highlight issues of broad concern while emphasizing the specific needs of low-income working families. An excellent example of this occurred in the Wolverine State, where the **Michigan League for Human Services** has used research reports, opinion pieces, and new media tools to build a case for public investments in, and policy changes to, the state's adult literacy system.

Finally, *state partners can contribute to the effective adoption and implementation of promising policies.* WFPF partners share a commitment to advancing and sustaining long-term policy and system changes – changes that ideally will permit low-income working adults to hone their skills and acquire additional education. Not only are WFPF state partners committed to the success of low-income working families, but these organizations also possess the capacities needed to inform the design of policy and program reforms, shape implementation, and evaluate performance. Put differently, state partners are well-equipped to insure that public investments are targeted, effective, and sustained.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, national foundations have taken an increased interest in the role that state education and skill development systems play in fostering regional prosperity and individual opportunity. The resulting philanthropic initiatives have cast a bright light on the importance of state systems and have created opportunities for WFPF state partners seeking to advance shared goals. Thanks to their expertise and credibility, state partners are positioned to contribute to state policy change opportunities created by foundation initiatives and help push for meaningful reforms to state postsecondary education and skill development systems. The result: widened doorways of opportunities for America's low-income working families.

WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT RECOMMENDATIONS

WFPF partners can help achieve state policy changes pursued by these philanthropic initiatives. State partners should consider these actions:

- 1) Use the WFPF's data-driven policy change process to spotlight the needs of low-skilled workers.
- 2) Use their analytical capabilities to help identify meaningful opportunities for policy and programmatic changes.
- 3) Use their expertise in forming strategic partnerships to build the coalitions and networks needed to advance reforms.
- 4) Combine their research and communications capacities with their credibility among elected and appointed policymakers to catalyze change.
- 5) Contribute to the effective adoption and implementation of promising policies.

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ENDNOTES

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² Brandon Roberts and Deborah Povich. *Still Working Hard, Still Falling Short: New Findings on the Challenges Confronting America's Working Families*, Working Poor Families Project, October 2008, p.i.

³ Anthony Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl, *Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018*, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, Washington, DC, 2010, p. 13. On the Internet at <http://www9.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/FullReport.pdf>

⁴ According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 40 percent of Americans between the ages of 25 and 34 had a postsecondary degree in 2007. On this measure, the United States' performance ranked 10th out of the world's 30 most economically advanced countries. For more information, http://www.oecd.org/document/24/0,3343,en_2649_39263_238_43586328_1_1_1_1,00.html

⁵ The Working Poor Families Project, Population Relevance Bureau (PRB) analysis of 2008 American Community Survey Microdata.

⁶ The Working Poor Families Project, PRB analysis of 2000 and 2008, American Community Survey Microdata.

⁷ Economic Policy Institute, analysis of 2000 and 2007 March Current Population Survey Microdata and Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, analysis of 2000 and 2007 American Community Survey.

⁸ The Working Poor Families Project, PRB analysis of 2008 American Community Survey Microdata.

⁹ Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl, see note 3 above, pp. 13 and 16.

¹⁰ The Working Poor Families Project, PRB analysis of 2008 American Community Survey Microdata.

¹¹ Barbara Townsend and Susan Twombly, "Introduction," *Community Colleges: Policy in the Future Context*, Apex Publishing Company, Westport, CT., 2001, p. ix.

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